RIDERS OF THE PLAIN CELEBRATED CHRISTMAS IN 1875 WITH FEAST IN LOG BARRACKS AT AT ALBERTA FORT

FOLKLORE

Original Member Tells of Yuletide Spread of 49 Years Ago -- Red River Jigs and Reels Danced With a Will Untill Morning

G.C. King

By Charlotte Gordon

CHRISTMAS in Canada with the glistening snow upon the pines and the music of sleigh bells in the air makes for the typical season of childhood dreams that were associated with a plump Santa Claus in furs driving prancing reindeers.

Time and environment make for such different conditions in Christmas celebrations yet the pioneer on the western plains, the explorer on Artic stopes, the homesteader, the rancher of Canada, has the same old spirit of Christmas with the call of home, the call of race that comes to men no matter where they are.

And there were picturesque celebrations in Canada's primitive days. One visualizes the old North-West Mounted Police Barracks at the Calgary Fort in Alberta, back in 1875. The police who had traveled across miles of prairie stretches to bring law and order to the great lone land, had a real setting for their festivities in the new log barracks with its great fireplace.

Buying the "Goodies"

G. C. King, one of the original members of the force tells of the preparations: "We had a mess room 70 feet long; a well equipped kitchen and a good cook so we held a meeting and arranged to have a dinner and a dance. We learned that there was a supply of good things at the trading post at Sheep's Creek,

(only 60 miles away). So the boys drove in the big police sleigh to secure the Christmas "goodies." They purchased raisins, currants and other dried fruits, nuts, candies and essences. So the cook went to work with a will."

We can picture that Christmas -- a very cold day, 30 to 40 degrees below zero, deep snow, the flag, our Empire's emblem, fluttering over the fort, making a colorful note on the great white landscape. Within were great log-fires roaring, a savory ordor and warmth and cheer.

There was a long bare table, tin cups, mugs, spoons, cheap knives and forks but a feast worthy of "The Riders of the Plains."

"We started off with oyster soup," said Mr. King, "very delicious Even if it was made of canned oysters and condensed mild. Then followed prairie chicken, trout from the Bow River, deer meat and buffalo meat, There was plum pudding, mince pie, nuts, candies, tea and coffee. Then came toasts and songs and the dance with a half-breed fiddler who beat time with his foot, vigorously nodded his head and

"Felt the fiddle's slender neck,
Brought out the notes with thrum and cheek."

"The partners were the dusky lasses of the settlement and the Red River jig and reels were danced with a will until early morning."

RABBIT MULLIGAN

Innes, John

A Christmas reminiscence of John Innes, artist of Vancouver, B. C. , is of interest. Mr. Innes is well-known as the artist who painted the last picture of President Harding as he stood among the Douglas pines in Stanley Park, Vancouver, giving his last address to many thousands of people.

"My first Christmas in western Canada," said Mr. Innes, "was on my ranch in Alberta, on the Bow River, near the mouth of the High River in a very modest little log shack."

"Christmas day was cold and clear - very cold and very clear. I looked after the horses and chopped wood while my partner, who was a dandy cook, prepared the meal. This consisted of nicely stuffed and roasted prairie chickens, rabbit mulligan and dumplings and bacon and a big plum duff. The way we made plum duff was to mix flour, suet and baking powder; into this we dumped a large quantity of raisins, brown sugar and spices and mixed it up with water, then rolled it in flour, placed in a bag and boiled. With a vinegar sauce it was jake. Just writing about it makes me wish I had some. And the prairie chicken and rabbit mulligan -- oh Boy!

What did we drink? We had tea in tin dishes. Did you ever drink tea with brown sugar out of a tin dish? If you have not, you should. We ended our feast with H. B. rum, 40 O. P., hot with lemon and sugar, T. and B. tobacco, and I guess that's all.

For recreation and evening entertainment, we just followed our usual customs. We had Dickens, Thackeray, Shakespeare,

the Bible, and a mixed assortment of boys' books. Often when I was alone in the shack I would see painted faces, with noses flattened against the pane. Then, in would come some Indians and squat on the floor to smoke with me, And we would talk in sign language and teach other words in English and Blackfoot. Also I made sketches of them."

A Bachelor's Christmas

R.C Thomas

It was in 1884 that Alderman R. C. Thomas of Calgary, then a young Englishman "just out" from the old land, spent his first Christmas on the western plains, as the guest of a rancher at Midnapore in southern Alberta.

"A dozen bachelors sat down to that Christmas feast -- mostly all young Englishmen. There was the honored 'big round roast of beef of old England with the sprig of holly on it,' and there was the real old English plum pudding brought to the table with the flaming brandy top.

"The party afterwards sat around the box stove and told stories of old England and other Christmases they had known across the sea.

At Fort Chipewyan

Candles

Sister Laverty of the Gray Nuns, for some years principal of the Convent at Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca in the far North tells of the wonderful recognition of Christmas at that post. A custom of the traders, trappers, half-breeds, Indians, is to make gifts of candles all through the year for Christmas mass.

Several hundreds are thus secured and the Christmas mass is a great festival in the Northland to which the Indians come from as far as 150 miles by dog-sleighs.

One can visualize the Christmas scene in that prinitive church of the North, set in miles of snowy mural decorations, the work of the priests and nuns. The charm of twilight dims its outlinesl then three hundred candles glow, softly golden and the magic music is wafted on the Aurora Borealis as it widens over a star-filled plain.

Truly the spirit of Christmas is there!

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